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Radio Messages Confirm Role of PLO in Lebanon

Intercepted radio messages extinguish any lingering doubts about the Palestine Liberation Organization's participation in the recent assault on the Lebanese government.

The defeated PLO forces that President Reagan rescued from the Israeli onslaught a year ago—the same demoralized troops that U.S. Marines escorted safely out of Lebanon from under Israeli guns—are back. No one doubts they soon will be firing at their Marine benefactors if the cease-fire breaks down.

Out of the guerrilla-infested mountains overlooking Marine positions have come terse radio calls from PLO units. The messages have been monitored, and my associate Lucette Lagnado has seen the transcripts. A few excerpts:

- "Our forces are grouping We are on the International Road, Beirut-Damascus, and we are chasing the Lebanese forces towards Souk el-Gharb City."

- "Our forces are participating in the fight that is taking place in the mountain side by side with the PSP [Druze militia]."

- "We need more personnel

. . . . It is very urgent to support the fight in Bhamdoun City." And later: "Our role in the fight in Bhamdoun was extremely appreciated and the morale is very high."

The story is told in documents that have been classified heavily. The CIA foresaw the Israeli incursion into Lebanon and urged "that the agency should provide military and financial assistance" to the Christian Phalangist militias. The purpose of this was to block Israel from establishing a pro-Israeli government in Lebanon.

The administration adopted the CIA recommendation and, thereafter, outbid the Israelis for the Christian Phalangists' loyalty. When the Israelis struck last year as the CIA had predicted, Reagan intervened. The rout of the PLO forces had been all but consummated when U.S. pressure halted the Israeli advance.

For a historic moment, Reagan had it within his power to command events. He could have allowed the Israelis to complete their mop-up, crush the PLO, chase the Syrians out of Lebanon and establish a pro-western government in Beirut.

But Secretary of State George P. Shultz, who had come to the State Department from doing business with the Arab world, was determined to keep Lebanon out of Israel's clutches. He persuaded the president to send Philip C. Habib to the Middle East to negotiate a settlement.

Shultz and Habib were magnificently confident, serene in their special insight into the Arab mind. All they had to do, they thought, was to pressure the Israelis to withdraw. Then Syrian President Hafez Assad would agree cheerfully to end his long occupation of eastern Lebanon.

Meanwhile, they would set up in Beirut a government that would be pro-American but acceptable to the Arab world, because it would be free of Israeli taint.

Who would keep order in Lebanon until the new regime could govern? Shultz arranged to send in the Marines as part of an international peace-keeping force. Their stay would be short, he promised.

But underlings tried to warn that Assad would not pull his troops out, that a durable Lebanese government could not be patched together with diplomatic glue and that this turbulent piece of earth would wind up as a U.S. protectorate. They also warned that the only Middle East force strong enough to block Soviet-Syrian designs was the Israeli army.

The alternative was to leave the U.S. Marines in Lebanon indefinitely and risk being dragged into a Vietnam-style war. The president listened to Shultz.

Footnote: Now the administration has reversed its position, begging Israel to stay while telling Congress that the Lebanese army needs more U.S. support.